

June 30, 2000

The Hallucinogen PMA

OVERVIEW

Paramethoxyamphetamine (PMA), also known as 4-methoxyamphetamine, is an illicit, synthetic hallucinogen with stimulant effects similar to other clandestinely manufactured amphetamine derivatives, including MDMA (Ecstasy). Until recently, illicit abuse of PMA in the United States had been limited to the early 1970s. However, since February 2000, PMA has been found in Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Virginia, and Canada. Moreover, in May 2000, PMA ingestion was associated with three deaths in the Chicago, Illinois area.

EFFECTS

PMA is a potent and potentially lethal synthetic hallucinogen, which was placed in Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act in 1973. The drug has been sold in tablet, capsule, or powder form and its appearance and cost are comparable to MDMA. Common street names for PMA are "Death" and "Mitsubishi Double-Stack."

The effects associated with PMA vary depending on the dose and whether other drugs are present. PMA is typically administered orally in pill or capsule form. PMA powder, although uncommon, may be inhaled or injected to accelerate the response. Ingesting a dose of less than 50 mg, usually one pill or capsule, without other drugs or alcohol, induces symptoms reminiscent of MDMA. Such effects include increased pulse rate and blood pressure, increased and labored respiration, elevated body temperature, erratic eye movements, muscle spasms, nausea, and heightened visual stimulation. Doses over 50 mg are considered potentially lethal, especially when taken with other drugs, such as amphetamine derivatives, cannabis, cocaine, prescription medications like fluoxetine (Prozac), and alcohol. Complications associated with higher doses are cardiac arrhythmia and arrest,



PMA recently confiscated from overdose victim by the McHenry, Illinois Police. Photograph courtesy of the McHenry, Illinois Police Department

breathing problems, pulmonary congestion, renal failure, hyperthermia, vomiting, convulsions, coma, and death.

ABUSE/AVAILABILITY

In 1973, PMA was produced by clandestine laboratory facilities in Canada. Before the illicit production was halted, PMA manufactured by these operations appeared in limited areas of Canada and the United States. During that time, two deaths and three suspected deaths were associated with PMA abuse in the United States, as well as eight deaths in Canada. Federal, state and local forensic laboratories in Georgia, Kansas, Missouri, and the Centre of Forensic Science in Toronto, Canada, confirmed that PMA contributed to those deaths. From 1974 to early 2000, no deaths attributed to PMA abuse had been reported in Canada or the United States. However, in May 2000, three deaths in the cities of Lisle, McHenry, and Naperville, Illinois, were associated with PMA ingestion.

In 1994, the abuse of PMA emerged in isolated areas of the Australian drug-abusing population. Currently, the drug is still available illicitly at nightclubs and rave parties where it is generally sold as MDMA. In fact, dealers and purchasers may be unaware that they are selling or buying PMA. Since PMA appeared in 1994 it



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has been associated with approximately 12 deaths. Forensic science centers in Australia confirmed that most of the overdose victims ingested toxic amounts of PMA.

PRODUCTION

Currently, PMA is legally produced in the United States for limited commercial applications. A small quantity is also allocated for Schedule I scientific research.

The illicit form of PMA is produced in clandestine laboratories. Several different methods can be used to manufacture PMA, although the method used depends largely upon the availability of certain precursors. The exact synthesis procedure recently used to manufacture the PMA found in Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Virginia, and Canada is still unknown. Contrary to initial newspaper reports from Australia, the likelihood that PMA is inadvertently produced during the manufacture of MDMA is highly unlikely.

To date, only two clandestine laboratories producing PMA have been seized worldwide: in Toronto, Canada in 1973 and in Worms, Germany in 1991.

DISTRIBUTION

A major trafficking network involving PMA has never been identified in the United States. A very minor trafficking network extending from Toronto, Canada into Kansas City, Missouri; Kansas City, Kansas; Atlanta, Georgia; North Carolina, and Washington D.C. was discovered in 1973.

Currently, illicit PMA distributors in the United States have targeted dealers primarily at rave clubs. Dealers may be unaware that they are buying or selling PMA as opposed to other club drugs like MDMA. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) along with state and local authorities are currently attempting to determine if there is any connection between the PMA samples recently identified in the United States and Canada.

OUTLOOK

The increasing popularity associated with designer drugs increases the risk that users may accidentally take substances, such as PMA. The continued presence of PMA in Australia and the recent appearance in Canada and the United States is cause for concern that PMA will be associated with additional overdoses and deaths. The DEA is actively developing additional information on PMA in order to identify the source of production and the distribution network.

This report was prepared by the DEA Intelligence Division, Office of Domestic Intelligence, Domestic Strategic Unit with the assistance of the Drug and Chemical Evaluation Section.